

Dating the Vernacular Inscription on the Wall of St Mark's Treasury in Venice. A Case Study in Medieval Epigraphic Philology

The present investigation has three interlinked goals. The first is to resolve a concrete and long-standing problem that has challenged epigraphists and art historians. It involves establishing a plausible date for a five-line proverbial inscription carved in Old Venetian on the Treasury wall of San Marco in Venice. The inscription, often read and sometimes misread, has a lengthy critical history given its sensitive location in the great ceremonial passageway between St Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace, the nerve centres of Venetian religious and political power. It is also the focal point of an intriguing sculptural ensemble whose problematic dating is also at stake in the investigation. The critical disarray over the chronology of our public text is such that it has been assigned to various points between the 12th and the 15th centuries. I attempt to clarify this chronological issue with detailed evidence drawn, in particular, from palaeography and linguistics. The second aim is to demonstrate, via a specific case study, the descriptive and predictive value of vernacular epigraphic philology as a critical tool in historical research when its inter-disciplinary resources are systematically and conjointly exploited. The third objective is to provide an epigraphic contextualization for the enquiry. In this background survey I review the current state of play in Italian and Venetian medieval inscription studies, highlighting the discipline's recent advances but also its reluctance to draw on the type of diachronic and comparative analysis of script and language exemplified in our case study.

KEYWORDS Venice, epigraphy, inscriptions, vernacular, palaeography, linguistics

1. TERMINOLOGY

The terms inscription and epigraph (Italian *iscrizione* and *epigrafe*) are employed as synonyms in the essay.¹ The definition provided for the former, and substantially replicated for the latter, in the *Oxford English Dictionary* covers most of the senses in which I understand them:

That which is inscribed; a piece of writing or lettering upon something; a set of characters or words written, engraved, or otherwise traced upon a surface; *esp.* a legend, description, or record traced upon some hard substance for the sake of durability, as on a monument, building, stone, tablet, medal, coin, vase etc.²

A more complete definition, where the length and tenor of the inscribed message, its physical location and its reception are addressed, was proposed by Armando Petrucci, arguably the founding theorist of medieval epigraphy in Italy:

un testo di natura commemorativa, enunciativa o designativa, di solito di non lunga estensione, inciso (ma a volte anche dipinto o eseguito a mosaico) con propositi di accuratezza ed intenzioni di solennità su un supporto di materiale duro (marmo, arredi, oreficerie, e così via), ed esposto alla pubblica visione e lettura in un luogo chiuso (chiesa, cappella, palazzo), o all'aperto (piazza, via, cimitero).³

¹ Inscription and *iscrizione* are from Latin INSCRIPTIŌNEM 'inscription', itself from the verb INSCRĪBĒRE 'to inscribe' (literally 'to write into or on'). Epigraph and *epigrafe* are from Greek ἐπιγραφή 'inscription' from ἐπιγράφειν 'to write upon' < ἐπί 'upon' + γράφειν 'to write'. The derivative terms for the practitioner of the discipline are epigrapher ~ epigraphist (Italian *epigrafista*). The object of study is epigraphy and the discipline is either epigraphy or epigraphics, with Italian *epigrafia* covering all of these. A glance at the chronology of this terminology is instructive. Epigraph and epigraphy are 17th century coinages in English, while *epigrafia* and *epigrafe* were very uncommon in Italian until the 19th century. All are learned terms originally applied, unsurprisingly, to classical epigraphy which was until relatively recently epigraphy *tout court*. The terms inscription ~ *i(n)scrizione* could, instead, be described as semi-learned and have a longer history in both languages. Inscription goes back in English to the 16th century, appearing memorably in the casket scene of the *Merchant of Venice* (II, vii, 14). It gradually replaced the earlier *scripture*. The Italian (or rather Tuscan) equivalent, sporadic in the Middle Ages, starts to appear commonly in the mid 16th century, spelled *iscrizione*. The normal term for an inscription in Italy in the medieval period was *titolo/titolo* (from TITULUM, the most frequently used word for 'inscription' in Ancient Rome) and was, in particular, associated with epitaphs and the *titulus crucis*. It is also used for the numerous imaginary inscriptions in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice: Aldo Manuzio, 1499).

² *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) online at <http://www.oed.com/>, ss.vv. *inscription* and *epigraph*.

³ A. Petrucci, *Medioevo da leggere. Guida allo studio delle testimonianze scritte del Medioevo italiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), p. 38. Petrucci was correct in his cautious observation that an inscription is 'di solito di non lunga estensione'. Some of the finest vernacular inscriptions in Venice are, in fact, of considerable length. A notable case is the grandiose 18-line epigraph from circa 1348, in raised and gilded letters 4 cm high, describing in vivid terms in Old Venetian the great earthquake that wreaked havoc in Venice between January and March of that year. Situated in the Gothic lunette over the archway entrance to the former Scuola Grande di S. Maria della Carità (now part of the Accademia galleries) in the *sestiere* of Dorsoduro, its marble inscription surface is cm 230 x 100, and including abbreviations it comprises 332 words amounting to 1392 characters. One extreme example actually challenges the boundary between page-text and inscription. This is the remarkable mid-15th century *mappa mundi* produced by the Camaldolese monk Fra Mauro, displayed until the 19th century in the monastery of S. Michele in Isola in the lagoon and now housed in the Biblioteca Marciana. The great circular planisphere on parchment mounted on board (circa cm 230 x 230) is covered in around 3000 bookscript captions

Petrucci's consistent deployment of the cover term *scritture esposte*, useful in emphasizing that inscriptions are not exclusively inscribed on stone,⁴ has gained wide currency in recent years and has generated the pithy expression *volgare esposto*, translatable as 'vernacular writing for public display', for medieval vernacular inscriptions as a category.⁵

By epigraphic philology I mean the discipline and process of establishing and fully explicating inscriptions in their material and textual aspects.⁶

2. VENETIAN VERNACULAR EPIGRAPHY AND ITS ITALIAN CONTEXT

The fact that there is no consensus on the chronology of an important undated written artefact like the Treasury inscription suggests that scholars of medieval epigraphy in Italy have been tentative in integrating the historical, and therefore potentially predictive, dimension of script and language into their – necessarily multi-disciplinary – critical procedures.⁷ To contextualize this reticence I briefly review the current *status quaestionis* in Italian vernacular epigraphic studies, with a particular focus on Venice.

in Venetian. It is difficult to deny these the status of inscriptions in that they seem to have been conceived for public display precisely as *scritture esposte*.

⁴ While it is true that the majority of medieval Venetian epigraphs in the vernacular are – like the Treasury inscription – on stone (either cut or, more rarely, in relief), a minority are found on metal, wood, terracotta, parchment, fresco, tempera, oil painting, or textile. For the recent edition and analysis of two culturally significant examples – one on metal, one on textile – see R. Ferguson, 'Un'iscrizione in veneziano trecentesco su reliquiario marciano', *Quaderni Veneti*, 1 (4), 2015, 1-10; and idem, 'Torcello 1366: le scritte in volgare ricamate sul gonfalone di Santa Fosca', *Lingua e Stile*, 50 (2), 2015, 193-208.

⁵ See, in particular, A. Petrucci, *Potere, spazi urbani, scritture esposte: proposte ed esempi* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1985). Influential in establishing the expression *volgare esposto* was the chapter by Petrucci titled 'Il volgare esposto: problemi e prospettive', in «Visibile parlare». *Le scritture esposte nei volgari italiani dal Medioevo al Rinascimento*, ed. by C. Ciociola (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1997), pp. 45-58.

⁶ On the specific intersections between medieval epigraphy and Romance philology see L. Tomasin, 'Su filologia romanza ed epigrafia medievale', *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*, 132 (2), 2016, 493-526.

⁷ One of the first Italian practitioners to underline with urgency the necessarily multi-disciplinary nature of medieval epigraphics was the palaeographer and epigraphist Augusto Campana, 'Le iscrizioni medievali di San Gemini', in *San Gemini e Carsulae*, ed. by Umberto Ciotti et al. (Milan/Rome: Bestetti, 1976), pp. 83-132. On the terminology and procedures of epigraphics in general see W. Koch, 'Epigraphy', in *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms-Methods-Trends*, ed. by A. Classen (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 489-505. On the aims, contexts and specific methodologies of medieval epigraphy see R. M. Kloos, *Einführung in die Epigraphik der frühen Neuzeit* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980); R. Favreau, *Épigraphie médiévale* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997); and V. Debais, *Messages de pierre: la lecture des inscriptions dans la communication médiévale* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009). For a recent overview of the discipline in Italy see F. Geymonat, 'Scritture esposte', in *Storia dell'italiano scritto*, ed. by G. Antonelli et al., III (Rome: Carocci, 2014), pp. 57-100.

It is a critical commonplace that medieval Italian epigraphy is an underdeveloped discipline.⁸ There are several overlapping reasons for its relative neglect and consequent backwardness.⁹ Surprisingly, at first sight, the subject has been overshadowed rather than sustained by the intense attention and respect traditionally accorded to the ubiquitous inscriptions of the ancient, and especially the Roman, world. Those epigraphs, visible, legible and numerous, were cut into stone in prestigious and largely homogeneous inscriptional capital lettering in public spaces throughout the highly-literate Roman Empire, from Britain to the Middle East, with Rome as its epicentre.¹⁰ They have long been regarded as an essential tool in classical studies, and have consequently been extensively collected, edited, analyzed and integrated into historical and archaeological work.¹¹ Even the scholarly interest in the neo-Roman inscriptional revival in Latin of the Renaissance period, fostered by Italian Humanism, has had few if any positive repercussions for medieval epigraphy in Italy, and especially not for its drastically neglected vernacular branch.¹²

The settled state of classical epigraphy as a discipline, based on the high level of typological, material, linguistic and palaeographic homogeneity of its source material, on its physical and documentary accessibility,¹³ and on its centuries-long research tradition, have stacked the odds against medieval epigraphy and, *a fortiori*, against its vernacular subdivision. The medieval epigraphist in Italy faces daunting challenges in precisely these areas. At the

⁸ Armando Petrucci famously declared that ‘In Italia [...] un’epigrafia medievale praticamente non esiste, e tanto meno ne esiste una che si occupi specificamente di epigrafi medievali in lingua volgare’. Petrucci, ‘Il volgare esposto’, 47.

⁹ It should be emphasized that medieval epigraphy, although more developed in some European countries than in others, notably Germany and France, still suffers generally from the parcellization of research coverage, with islands of expertise alongside large areas of neglect, that characterizes Italy.

¹⁰ The canonical and familiar Roman epigraphic or monumental capitals have ‘square’, geometrically regular, forms cut for chiaroscuro effect in triangular section.

¹¹ ‘È cosa ben nota che le iscrizioni romane, nate dalla volontà di trasmettere ai posteri informazioni e dati precisi, sono *ab immemorabili* riconosciute come fonti storico-culturali di indiscutibile valore e che l’epigrafia classica è sempre stata ed è tuttora coltivata’. *Iscrizioni medievali bolognesi*, ed. by G. Roversi (Bologna: Istituto per la Storia di Bologna, 1982), p. 5. On the importance of Latin inscriptions in supplying information for various historical fields see J. Reynolds, ‘Inscriptions and Roman Studies 1910-1960’, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 50, 1960, 204-209.

¹² On the Renaissance revival of classical capitals in 15th-century epigraphy see G. Mardersteig, ‘Leon Battista Alberti e la rinascita del carattere lapidario romano nel Quattrocento’, *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica*, 2, 1959, 285-307; and, with specific reference to the Veneto, S. Zamponi, ‘La metamorfosi dell’antico: la tradizione antiquaria veneta’, in *I luoghi della scrittura da Francesco Petrarca agli albori dell’Umanesimo*, ed. by C. Tristano, M. Calleri, M. Magionami (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sul Medioevo), pp. 37-67.

¹³ The obvious example is the fundamental and ongoing *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, ed. (originally) by T. Mommsen (Berlin: Reimer, 1863-), with its circa 180,000 recorded inscriptions, 17 volumes, 13 supplements including indices and illustrations, and online database.

most basic level, the process of locating, documenting, photographing, editing and explicating Italy's legacy of medieval inscriptions is still at a relatively early stage: more advanced in some centres than in others, but nowhere complete. It is especially the case for those inscriptions, the overwhelming majority, dating from 1100 onwards. This underdevelopment is particularly striking in the case of vernacular epigraphy which had to wait until 2015 for the first tentative nationwide survey of critical activity in the field.¹⁴ Whereas classical inscriptions are available in large public and private collections, most medieval inscriptions – especially the vernacular ones – tend still to be *in situ* or close to their original locations, and to be largely uncensused and unprotected. This is very much the case in Venice where only a tiny minority of vernacular inscriptions are safeguarded and labelled. These few are housed and displayed in the finest collection of medieval epigraphs in the city, in the cloisters and on the stairs of the Seminario Patriarcale complex at the Salute.¹⁵ However, our poor knowledge of even the whereabouts of some of the medieval vernacular epigraphs in Venice and, consequently, of what remains to be preserved and documented, is demonstrated by my own chance discovery in 2014, on the wall of a small garden in the grounds of Ca' Rezzonico, of an important 15th century inscription tablet emanating from the Venetian carpenters' guild (*Sc(u)ola d(e)i marangoni*). This remarkable object had last been reported in the 19th century and was believed to be lost.¹⁶

Compared to the artefacts of classical epigraphy, the range of medieval inscriptional types and material supports across the peninsula and within

¹⁴ L. Cacchioli and A. Tiburzi, 'Contributi e fonti per lo studio del volgare esposto in Italia', *Critica del Testo*, 18 (2), 2015, 103-108, and eadem, 'Lingua e forme dell'epigrafia volgare', *Studj Romanzi*, 10, 2014, 311-352.

¹⁵ The Seminario collection originated in the dedicated work of recovery and preservation carried out by a small group of amateur Venetian scholars and enthusiasts in the early 19th century. They rescued as many inscriptions as possible from the tragic destruction of Venetian churches and religious foundations – which were epigraphic treasurehouses – following the Napoleonic decrees of 25th April 1806 and 26th May 1807 that suppressed them. On the Seminario collection see the excellent critical edition by L. Di Lenardo, *La collezione epigrafica del Seminario Patriarcale di Venezia. Catalogo (secoli XII-XV)* (Venice: Marcianum Press, 2014). On pp. 92-97 and 104-115 Di Lenardo includes editions of three important 14th-century vernacular inscriptions. On the Napoleonic suppressions see B. Bertoli, *La soppressione di monasteri e conventi a Venezia dal 1797 al 1810* (Venice: Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Venezie, 2002).

¹⁶ The inscription, dated 1463, commemorates the purchase of land and the start of building work on the Scuola's guildhouse. It is carved in Gothic majuscules on a slab of Istrian stone measuring cm 150 x 23. I transcribe it using the conventional criteria adopted in the case study of the Treasury inscription and elsewhere in this essay. Abbreviated letters are restored within round brackets; missing letters are indicated by three dots in square brackets; reconstructions are in square brackets; the date is in small capitals. Word- and line-breaks are indicated by a single slash, larger breaks by a double slash: + *In Chr(ist)i no(m)i(n)e amen M^oCCCCCLXIII in tenpo de mi(stro) Çorçi Bia(n)co gastoldo e (con)pagni mi(stro) Nic[...]* / *scrivan mi(stro) Nicolo de Simon mi(stro) Valentin de Michiel mi(stro) Piero Bruto mi(stro) Aleg[...]* de [...] / *Matio de Chimento fo comprado questo teren e principiada questa fab[rica]*.

individual centres is considerably more diverse.¹⁷ In Venice alone a single church, the Basilica of St Mark, contains hundreds of lines of medieval epigraphic text in mosaic, as well as inscriptional writing of many sorts and techniques on a wide range of liturgical objects and reliquaries. As for script itself, the classical epigraphist deals exclusively with Roman monumental capitals and their occasional variants. The medieval Italian epigraphist faces a bewildering array of letter types – mainly majuscule but occasionally minuscule or with minuscule intrusions – which are rarely identical from centre to centre and whose chronology of appearance is variable and overlapping.¹⁸ Generalizing about lapidary script across such a variegated Italian environment is therefore hazardous, but a broad dynamic, and one that fits the facts particularly well in Venice, can be discerned.¹⁹ This sees lettering range from post-classical Roman capitals in various forms in the 11th and early 12th century, through the fluid category known as Romanesque in the 12th and 13th centuries to the mixed, more-or-less uncial, majuscule alphabets that gave way to the fully-developed Gothic type – it too with its many variations and developments at provincial level within contrasting timescales – between the mid-13th and mid-15th centuries. The period closes, in this scenario, with the revival of classical epigraphic script in the 15th century that manifested itself at different dates and with variable configurations from Italian city to city.²⁰ Whether Romanesque is a chronological or a stylistic designation and what exactly the definition of Gothic script is are not, however, settled matters.²¹ This

¹⁷ On the types and material supports of medieval inscriptions see C. Ciociola, 'Scrittura per l'arte, arte per la scrittura', in *Storia della letteratura italiana*, ed. by E. Malato, II (Rome: Salerno, 1995), pp. 531-580.

¹⁸ Augusto Campana put it succinctly: 'Nel campo medioevale la varietà delle forme grafiche è immensamente maggiore che per le iscrizioni antiche'. A. Campana, 'Tutela dei beni epigrafici', *Epigraphica*, 30, 1968, 5-19 (p. 16). Majuscule script (usually but not necessarily capital) is written between two imaginary bounding-lines. Minuscule, with ascenders and descenders, spans an imaginary four-line stave.

¹⁹ For local details of, and variations in, this dynamic see F. de Rubeis, 'La capitale romanica e la gotica epigrafica: una relazione difficile', *Scripta*, 1, 2008, 33-43. De Rubeis's overall analysis of the complex development of Italian medieval epigraphic script coincides substantially with my own and with that outlined by Di Lenardo, *La collezione epigrafica*, 34-35. On the still problematic terminology of Italian medieval lapidary lettering and its evolution, with an up-to-date bibliography of contrasting critical viewpoints, see N. Giovè Marchioli, 'Le iscrizioni medievali dei Musei Civici di Padova. Note paleografiche', in *Corpus dell'Epigrafia medievale di Padova 1. Le iscrizioni medievali dei musei civici di Padova. Museo d'arte medievale e moderna*, ed. by F. Benucci (Verona: Cierre, 2015), pp. 25-36 (note 2).

²⁰ The earliest neo-classical inscription I have found in Venice is the plaque (cm 60 x 30) from 1432 in Istrian stone, uniquely surmounted by a fortified tower in high relief, at Fondamenta Bragadin 587 (Dorsoduro), marking the Ospizio delle Pizzocchere di S. Agnese. The script is beautifully cut in Roman capitals, but with Byzantine <m> used in both occurrences: *Iesvs // Mylieribus / piaie legata / anno / MCCCCXXXII*. The earliest vernacular inscription in Venice in the 'new' script is found carved (less expertly) into the Istrian stone left-side pillar of the shoemaker's guildhouse (*Sc(u)ola d(e)i Caleg(h)eri*) in Campo S. Tomà. Measuring cm 36 x 23, it commemorates the purchase of the guild building: *1446 adi 14 [decen]b[ri]o / fu comprado / questa Scolla / del Arte / di Calegeri*.

²¹ See Giovè Marchioli, 'Le iscrizioni medievali', note 2: 'Nell'ambito dell'epigrafia medievale, disciplina che, almeno in Italia, presenta una fisionomia ancora fluida e che non ha trovato sinora una stabilizzazione definitiva

imprecision, compounded by the lack of a wider national and international background within which to contextualize their observations, has undoubtedly encouraged Italian epigraphists to restrict their critical comments about script to the generic or the strictly synchronic. A reluctance to categorize typologically and to situate epigraphic script comparatively and diachronically has therefore established itself as standard practice in Italy in medieval palaeographic analysis.²² Such methodological restriction can produce, in its particularizing objectivity, excellent, highly focused – but largely de-historicized – observations of individual letters and patterns of letter-form within a given inscription.

In an already varied Italian picture the inscriptions of medieval Venice stand out in terms of their palaeographic diversity, with developments and trends in script complicated by the presence of Byzantine cultural influence.²³ The prestige of Greek-influenced writing, exhibited especially in the remarkable range of inscriptional alphabets on the walls and domes of St Mark's, generated particular traditions in the city and lagoon. It conditioned the already *sui generis* nature of Venetian Romanesque in highly idiosyncratic ways and led to the survival of anachronistic letter types into the 14th and 15th centuries.²⁴ It also retarded and sometimes attenuated the elsewhere overwhelming onset of the Gothic fashion in the 13th century.

In addition to facing such typological, definitional and contextual challenges, medieval epigraphists in Italy are confronted with a testing language

[...] non esiste evidentemente, e purtroppo, una nomenclatura paleografica che sia consolidata e condivisa'. Work is finally being carried out to refine the discipline's use of Gothic as a descriptor: see *Las inscripciones góticas. II coloquio internacional de epigrafía medieval*, ed. by E. Martín López and V. García Lobo (Leon: Corpus Inscriptionum Hispaniae Medievalum, 2010). The distinctive features of vernacular epigraphic Gothic in Venice itself lie on a continuum of greater-to-lesser intensity peaking cumulatively between the mid-14th and mid-15th centuries. They are: contrastive strokes; integration into a majuscule script of inscriptional capitals with letters of uncial provenance; 'uncialesque' appearance involving overall roundedness; the closing of <c>, <e>, <f>, and sometimes <u/v>, with hairstrokes; pronounced serifing; module compression; aesthetic decorativeness in the ductus. Walter Koch's important analysis of the transition from Romanesque to Gothic script on the European level yielded broadly similar character-traits, but on a generally earlier timescale than in Venice. See W. Koch, 'Auf der Wege zur Gotischen Majuskel. Anmerkungen zur epigraphischen Schrift in romanischer Zeit', in *Inschrift und Material. Inschrift und Buchschrift*, ed. by W. Koch and C. Steininger (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999), pp. 225-247.

²² Characteristic of such tendencies is the preference for simply describing Gothic script as a juxtaposition, in varying proportions, of Roman capitals and uncial-derived letters.

²³ On Byzantine cultural influence on Venice see A. Pertusi, *Saggi veneto-bizantini* (Florence: Olschki, 1990).

²⁴ On the St Mark's mosaic inscriptions see *The Basilica of St Mark in Venice*, ed. by E. Vio (New York: Riverside, 1999), and R. M. Kloos, 'The palaeography of San Marco', in O. Demus, *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 295-307. All the inscriptions are collected and transcribed in M. Da Villa Urbani, 'Le iscrizioni', in *Basilica Patriarcale in Venezia. San Marco. I mosaici, le iscrizioni, la pala d'oro*, ed. by M. Da Villa Urbani et al. (Milan: Fabbri, 1991), pp. 17-218.

situation. Classical epigraphics reconstructs and deconstructs Latin, the most codified and stable of Western written languages. Medieval Italian epigraphics also handles, more often than not, inscriptional Latin. However, it is called upon as well to record and clarify texts in uncoded local Italo-Romance vernaculars. Engraved, painted or embroidered, this late-medieval vernacular epigraphy made its appearance, freestanding or alongside Latin on the inscriptional surface, at different moments and in varying contexts and proportions from place to place. Its presence calls for particular philological sensitivity, especially in the case of Venice where for historical reasons the early *volgare* showed structural variability and where vernacular writing for public display was unusually prominent in the 14th and 15th centuries.²⁵ Paradigmatic of Venetian exceptionalism in the latter regard is the contrast between Venice and nearby Padua whose vigorous medieval epigraphic tradition is almost exclusively in Latin.²⁶

At the national level the knowledge deficit in both of these aspects – the relative weight of the vernacular epigraphic presence and linguistic expertise in handling it – continues to handicap the discipline. We remain to a large extent in the dark about the quantitative distribution of such inscriptions across Italy, and we know practically nothing about the ratio within each city and region of vernacular to Latin inscriptions.²⁷ Indeed Italian epigraphics remains hampered at source by the absence of secure information about the location and distribution of the country's medieval epigraphic patrimony. The lack of a national inscriptional corpus for the pre-modern period, of the kind long underway in other major countries, is often and justifiably held up as both cause and symptom.²⁸ That such an Italian database remains highly desirable, indeed a *sine qua non* for the development of the subject, is beyond dispute. It would allow cross-regional evaluations of Italo-Romance inscriptions, on a

²⁵ On variability in early Venetian see R. Ferguson, 'Alle origini del veneziano: una koinè lagunare?', *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*, 121 (3), 2005, 476-509. For a full description of Old Venetian see idem, *A Linguistic History of Venice* (Florence: Olschki, 2007), pp. 161-207. On the emergence and status of the vernacular in Venice see idem, *Saggi di lingua e cultura veneta* (Padua: Cleup, 2013), pp. 135-156.

²⁶ F. Benucci, 'Latino e volgare nell'epigrafia medievale padovana', in *Dialetto: usi, funzioni, forme*, ed. by G. Marcato (Padua: Unipress, 2009), pp. 307-312.

²⁷ For Venice I have counted, on the basis of Cicogna's published and unpublished transcriptions, 313 *Trecento* inscriptions, with 218 in Latin and 95 in the vernacular, i.e. 30.35% of the total. For the *Quattrocento* 537 inscriptions, with 434 in Latin and 103 in the vernacular, i.e. 19.18% of the total (see, below, note 32). These vernacular percentages are almost certainly the highest by far of any major Italian city.

²⁸ The point was reiterated in O. Banti, 'Dall'epigrafia romanica alla pre-umanistica. La scrittura epigrafica dal XII alla fine del XV secolo a Pisa', *Scrittura e Civiltà*, 24, 2000, 61-101 (p. 61). A useful review of this patchy coverage, with a selective bibliography of the work published up to that point in individual Italian centres, is in N. Giovè Marchioli, 'L'epigrafia comunale cittadina', in *Le forme della propaganda politica nel Due e nel Trecento*, ed. by P. Cammarosano (Rome: École française de Rome, 1994), pp. 263-268.

quantitative and qualitative level, revealing urban and regional similarities, divergencies and peculiarities. It would disclose, too, how they cluster by chronology and category.²⁹ Finally, such a resource would facilitate the meaningful cross-national screening that has hitherto not been feasible. As for the linguistic dimension, it is fair to say that detailed understanding of the historical development of individual Italo-Romance vernaculars – essential for carrying out securely-informed analyses of language in time depth – is limited to that of a few major centres: notably Florence, Naples and, with an exceptional research concentration in recent decades, Venice.

Overall, then, the process of assessing the full import of Italian vernacular inscriptions in the late medieval period – in terms of the reasons for their appearance in given contexts and places, their potential audience, the nature of the historical and linguistic information they provide, and the types of script they deploy – is underway but still in its infancy. What has been present until now in Italy is some excellent work on the ground carried out in specific locations by gifted and dedicated epigraphists. The result is that we have relatively extensive knowledge of a few cities such as Pisa, Bologna and Modena thanks, in the first case, to Ottavio Banti, in the second to Bruno Breviglieri and Giancarlo Roversi and in the third to Augusto Campana.³⁰ On the other hand, there remain significant gaps in our appreciation of medieval epigraphic production, especially in the vernacular, of great cultural centres like Milan, Genoa, Florence and Naples.³¹

²⁹ The obvious models are, for France, the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*, ed. by R. Favreau et al., 24 vols (Paris: CNRS, 1974-); and, for Germany, the *Deutschen Inschriften des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, 96 vols, ed. by F. Panzer et al. (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1934-). Italy now has the ongoing *Inscriptiones Medii Aevi Italiae*, of which three volumes have been published, including the latest on the Veneto: *Inscriptiones Medii Aevi Italiae, III. Veneto. Belluno, Treviso, Vicenza*, ed. by F. de Rubeis (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2010). Unfortunately, for our purposes, this project only covers the early Middle Ages. However, an ambitious database project of Italian vernacular inscriptions, involving a cross-departmental team at La Sapienza university in Rome, has been announced. See L. Cacchioli, N. Cannata, A. Tiburzio, 'EDV. Italian Medieval Epigraphy in the Vernacular (9th-15th century). A new Database', in *Off the Beaten Track. Epigraphy at the Borders*, ed. by A. E. Felle and A. Rocco (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2016), pp. 91-129.

³⁰ *Le epigrafi e le scritte obituarie del Duomo di Pisa*, ed. by O. Banti (Pisa: Pacini, 1996); Banti, 'Dall'epigrafia romanica'; B. Breviglieri, 'Il volgare nelle scritture esposte bolognesi. Memorie di costruzioni e opere d'arte', in Ciociola, «*Visibile parlare*», 73-100; Roversi, *Iscrizioni medievali bolognesi*; A. Campana, 'La testimonianza delle iscrizioni', in *Lanfranco e Wiligermo. Il Duomo di Modena*, ed. by E. Castelnovo et al. (Modena: Panini, 1984), pp. 365-404.

³¹ Tommaso Gramigni recently made the remarkable observation that: 'il numero di testimonianze epigrafiche fiorentine del secolo XIV in lingua volgare non è noto: il tema meriterebbe un approfondimento specifico'. T. Gramigni, *Iscrizioni medievali nel territorio fiorentino fino al XIII secolo* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2012), p. 88, note 47.

Until quite recently the epigraphic history of Venice has been a paradoxical one. The city had the benefit of having virtually its entire inscriptional resources transcribed, and in part historically contextualized, by one of Italy's greatest antiquarian scholars of the 19th century, Emmanuele Antonio Cicogna (1789-1868).³² On the other hand, apart from some sporadic mention of inscriptions in publications relating to Venetian as a language or dialect, it was only from the last two decades of the 20th century onwards that the serious scientific work of editing and analyzing Venice's numerous surviving vernacular epigraphs began to be undertaken, first by Alfredo Stussi then by Lorenzo Tomasin and the present author.³³ Only now is the full extent of the city's exceptional production of vernacular inscriptions post-1300 beginning to be appreciated, censused and explicated. It is at last becoming clear that in terms of quantity, quality and the socio-cultural importance of this epigraphic inheritance Venice is probably unrivalled in the peninsula. The best recent examples of medieval epigraphics from Venice, the Veneto and elsewhere suggest a turning point in both the recognition of the specificity and

³² E. A. Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni veneziane*, 6 vols (Venezia: Orlandelli, 1824-1853). In addition to his admirable work in protecting and collecting inscriptions threatened by the edicts and actions of the Napoleonic, Austrian and Italian governments of Venice, Cicogna copied out some 11,000 inscriptions, Latin and vernacular, in Venice and the islands. These cover seven centuries and most locations, with the main exception of St Mark's Basilica. However, around 9,000 of his transcriptions remained unpublished at his death. His manuscript inscriptional notebooks were left to the Biblioteca del Museo Correr where they are consultable among the *Inedite*, in 17 buste, at BMCv, 2007-2023. All the unpublished inscriptions appeared, without critical comment, in *Corpus delle iscrizioni di Venezia e delle isole della laguna veneta di Emmanuele Antonio Cicogna*, ed. by P. Pazzi with S. Bergamasco, 3 vols (Venice: Biblioteca Orafa di Sant'Antonio Abate, 2001). Cicogna himself, in the first volume of his *Inscrizioni*, pp. 11-18, provided a reliable account of Venetian epigraphic scholarship from the Renaissance until the early 19th century.

³³ The pioneer of Venetian vernacular epigraphics was Alfredo Stussi who published a series of groundbreaking studies between 1980 and 1997. See A. Stussi, 'Antichi testi dialettali veneti', in *Guida ai dialetti veneti*, ed. by M. Cortelazzo, II (Padua: Cleup, 1980), pp. 85-100; *Epigrafe veneziana in volgare (1310)*, ed. by A. Stussi (Pisa: Cursi, 1980); idem, 'Due epigrafi della Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista a Venezia', in *Da una riva all'altra. Studi in onore di Antonio d'Andrea*, ed. by D. Della Terza (Fiesole: Calamo, 1995), pp. 189-196; idem, 'La carta lapidaria di Urbano V', in *Scritti filologici e linguistici in onore di Tristano Bolelli*, ed. by R. Ajello and S. Sani (Pisa: Pacini, 1995), pp. 483-491; idem, 'Epigrafi medievali in volgare dell'Italia settentrionale e della Toscana', in Ciociola, «*Visibile parlare*», 149-176. He was followed by Lorenzo Tomasin, his former pupil at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa: L. Tomasin, 'La lapide veneziana di S. Gottardo a Piazzola sul Brenta (1384)', *L'Italia Dialettale*, 62, 2001, 173-177; idem, «*Minima muralia*»: esercizio di epigrafia volgare medievale', *Vox Romanica*, 71, 2012, 1-12; idem, 'Epigrafi trecentesche in volgare nei dintorni di Venezia', *Lingua e Stile*, 47, 2012, 23-44. The present author has published the first complete critical collection of Venetian 14th-century vernacular inscriptions: R. Ferguson, 'Le pubbliche iscrizioni in volgare antico a Venezia', in Ferguson, *Saggi di lingua e cultura veneta*, 67-134. This was followed by the critical edition of the 14th- and 15th-century vernacular inscriptions of Venice's lay confraternities: R. Ferguson, *Le iscrizioni in antico volgare delle confraternite laiche veneziane: edizione e commento* (Venice: Marcianum Press, 2015). See also Ferguson, 'Un'iscrizione in veneziano trecentesco' and Ferguson, 'Torcello 1366'.

importance of vernacular epigraphy and in the methodological development of the discipline itself.³⁴

3. SCRIPT AND LANGUAGE AS TOOLS OF EPIGRAPHIC DATING

The practicalities of epigraphic philology involve: transcription and establishment (of the text); dating (verifying the date of the text when present, establishing or estimating it when absent); measurement (of both inscriptional surface and letter size); assessment (of the state of the artefact); photographing (the whole and textual detail); identification and description (of support material, location and inscriptional technique); contextualization (historical, typological and critical); and analysis (linguistic and palaeographic).³⁵

When the dating of an inscription is problematic the resources of linguistic and palaeographic analysis are too seldom exploited in Italian epigraphic philology. Yet language and script are precisely, in conjunction with relevant external historical data, the key internal elements in any scientific dating process.³⁶ Vernacular inscriptions are a rich linguistic resource whose written message may reveal diachronic, diatopic, diastratic and diamesic

³⁴ It is heartening that the first work to attempt to collect, document and study all the extant medieval vernacular Romance inscriptions up to 1275 has been published recently in Italy: L. Petrucci, *Alle origini dell'epigrafia volgare. Iscrizioni italiane e romanze fino al 1275* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2010). While Livio Petrucci's scholarship is impeccable and his achievement invaluable, one notes the customary reluctance to venture into linguistic and palaeographic cross-comparisons. Encouraging for their tentative efforts to diachronically exploit epigraphic language and, to a lesser degree, script are two recent Venetian *tesi di laurea* from Ca' Foscari: F. Graziani, *Epigrafi volgari veneti del Trecento* (supervisor L. Tomasin, 2013); M. Mocellin, *Epigrafi volgari veneziane del XV secolo* (supervisor D. Baglioni, 2016).

³⁵ A fine recent example of the practical application of these methodologies is the first volume of the project to publish the entire medieval epigraphy of Padua, carried out by a distinguished inter-disciplinary team from the University of Padua. See Benucci, *Corpus dell'epigrafia di Padova*.

³⁶ The potential fruitfulness of applying the internal evidence of script and language to the dating problems of medieval Romance inscriptions is emphasized by Tomasin, 'Su filologia romanza', 522-524, with examples. He also underlines the necessary caution required, with an instance of mistaken chronology taken from recent Venetian epigraphics. The case concerns an otherwise flawless essay by Alfredo Stussi in which he plausibly, but incorrectly, assigned the second of a pair of badly damaged medieval inscriptions, originally in the courtyard of the Scuola Grande di S. Giovanni Evangelista, to 1353 on the basis of external evidence (Stussi, 'Due epigrafi della Scuola Grande'). Stussi's conclusion was subsequently accepted by both Tomasin and myself. However, newly-discovered irrefutable external evidence has allowed the date to be shifted forward to 1453. Tomasin argues (p. 524) that there was insufficient internal palaeographic or linguistic evidence in the inscription itself to have resolved the issue one way or the other. However, having revisited the language and script of the epigraph with a view to preparing a new edition, and compared them again with those of the accompanying inscription – itself securely dated to 1349 –, I have identified enough trace-evidence of linguistic and scriptural evolution to suggest a 15th-century date. Tomasin's cautionary point is nevertheless valid. Indeed, the care needed in handling palaeographic dating evidence was already underlined by P. Deschamps, *Étude sur la paléographie des inscriptions lapidaires de la fin de l'époque mérovingienne aux dernières années du XII^e siècle* (Paris: Société Générale d'Imprimerie et d'Édition, 1929), pp. 8-9.

variation. Such subtle stratification constitutes a precious reservoir of cultural information – one that has remained largely untapped – and of linguistic clues that can help situate an inscription in time with greater certainty. Scriptural evidence has equal dating potential, but since Italian medieval epigraphics has tended to confine its lettering analysis to description rather than interpretation this predictive dimension has rarely come into play. Yet when rigorously contextualized within documented script traditions and trends palaeographic scrutiny of undated artefacts invariably narrows down dating options. The absence of database coverage is a major obstacle to such processes. It is compounded by the dearth of overarching or particularized studies on the evolution of epigraphic script-types, on the lines of the major surveys long existing in palaeography and diplomatics.³⁷ Apart from the admirable but isolated calligraphic work on the development of medieval Pisan epigraphic lettering by Ottavi Banti,³⁸ nothing exists that even matches older studies by non-Italian epigraphists, such as Paul Deschamps' documentation of lettering in French inscriptions between the 6th and 12th centuries or Nicolette Gray's detailed review of epigraphic script in Italy between the 8th and 10th centuries.³⁹ Nothing equals the kind of research in this area being carried out currently in France.⁴⁰ Above all, Italian medieval epigraphics needs to follow the example of historical expertise in, and comparative analysis of, epigraphic palaeography that was splendidly exemplified by the wide-ranging, deeply informed studies of Stanley Morison.⁴¹ If it is to situate script more satisfactorily both chronologically and culturally it must, finally, pay closer attention than hitherto to the intertwined relationship between medieval epigraphic script and book display capitals.⁴²

³⁷ E.g. Bernhard Bischoff, *Paläographie des römischen Altertums und des abendländischen Mittelalters* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1979). On palaeography and medieval epigraphy see W. Koch, 'Spezialfragen der Inschriftenpaläographie', in *Epigrafia medievale greca e latina. Ideologia e funzione*, ed. by G. Cavallo and C. Mango (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1995), pp. 267-291.

³⁸ Banti, 'Dall'epigrafia romanica'.

³⁹ Deschamps, *Étude sur la paléographie*; N. Gray, 'The palaeography of Latin inscriptions in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries in Italy', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 16, 1948, 38-171.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., V. Debais, R. Favreau, C. Treffort, 'L'évolution de l'écriture épigraphique en France au Moyen Âge et ses enjeux historiques', *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, 165, 2007, 101-137.

⁴¹ Notably S. Morison, *Politics and Script* (Oxford: OUP, 1972). His masterly survey of medieval script 1050-1450 is on pp. 197-263. That Italian epigraphics has understood the urgency of addressing the issue for some time is clear from the interesting contributions in A. Petrucci et al., 'Epigrafia e paleografia. Inchiasta sui rapporti fra due discipline', *Scrittura e Civiltà*, 5, 1981, 265-312.

⁴² On display script see P. Stirnemann and M. H. Smith, 'Forme et fonction des écritures d'apparat dans les manuscrits latins (VIII^e-XV^e siècle)', *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, 165, 2007, 67-100. Within Venetian vernacular epigraphics the focus in this area should be on the rapport between local forms of Gothic epigraphic script and the display capitals found in the city's many splendidly illustrated guild and confraternity statute

Venetian vernacular epigraphics is particularly equipped to address the linguistic issue. Its main practitioners have come to epigraphy from backgrounds in historical linguistics, dialectology and textual philology. They are well placed to bring the expertise needed to carry out such historical linguistic scrutiny with the necessary rigour, although until recently they too have tended to confine themselves to synchronic analysis. As for the palaeographic inspection of both Latin and vernacular medieval epigraphs in Venice, description rather than contextualized and interpretative analysis remains the norm. The case study of the Treasury inscription of San Marco attempts to demonstrate the productivity of combining both internal critical approaches, as a complement to external data, in order to arrive at a higher degree of probability in the dating of a vernacular inscription in Venice that has posed a critical conundrum for 250 years.⁴³

4. THE TREASURY INSCRIPTION: A CASE STUDY

TRANSCRIPTION⁴⁴

(a)

LOM PO FAR E

dIE INPENSAR

books. On the *mariegole* manuscript illustrations see L. Humphrey, *La miniatura per le confraternite e le arti veneziane. Mariegole dal 1260 al 1460* (Venice: Cierre/Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 2015).

⁴³ Other issues that Venetian vernacular epigraphy could profitably address are: linguistic similarities and differences between inscriptional Venetian and that employed in the *mariegole*; timescale and modes of Tuscan penetration in vernacular epigraphy; presence or absence of Latin formulae; inscriptional punctuation (in Venice it is notably limited) contrasted with other Italian centres and Romance areas; general lack of preparatory lining on inscriptional surfaces compared to other centres and countries; Venetian lettering specificities such as the substantial absence of the curved <ʈ>, derived from half-uncial book script, common in French and some northern Italian epigraphs.

⁴⁴ I use three transcriptions. (a) is an attempt at a ‘diplomatic’ transcription in the absence of appropriate script fonts. It does not endeavour to replicate the ductus of Gothic or other lettering, but shows instead the inscription layout and majuscule case, the relationship between capital and minuscule, and ligatured letters (using an inverted breve). Abbreviations, interpuncts and other punctuation marks, if present, would be shown. <v/u> is rendered, in the present case, as <u>. A true diplomatic reproduction, which can only be done calligraphically, is rendered partly unnecessary by photographic records. (b) is the standard notation used in epigraphics. It is a compromise between a diplomatic and conventional transcription. Uppercase or lowercase can be employed; line and word divisions are indicated by slashes or vertical bars; no extraneous punctuation is used; abbreviations are opened out within round brackets and integrations are inserted between square brackets; line numbers may, as here, be inserted. (c) is a fully punctuated interpretative reading.

E UEGA QUEL
O ChE LI PO IN
ChONTRAR

(b)

Lom po far e / die inpensar [2]/ e vega quel/o che li po in/chontrar [5]

(c)

L'om pò far e die inpensar e vega quello che li po incontrar.

DIGEST: Man is able to act, so must reflect and consider what may befall him.

DATE AND DATING HISTORY: Undated, but probably circa 1300. The inscription has previously been assigned, largely impressionistically, to various points between the 12th and 15th centuries. Meschinello, in his important 18th-century survey of inscriptions in St Mark's, was the first to publish the epigraph, transcribing it erroneously: *L om po far e die in pensar elega quello che li po inchontrar*. He dated it to the 12th century on the basis of its 'caratteri Gottici' (sic).⁴⁵ Gamba in the early 19th century re-published it, correcting most but not all of Meschinello's mistakes and clearly establishing the meaning of the adage. He opted for a similar, very early, dating.⁴⁶ Cicogna transcribed it identically to Gamba, with *in pensar* instead of *inpensar* (l. 2). He moved the date forward to the late-12th or early-13th century – 'Essa pare scultura del secolo XII o del principio del XIII' – and likened the dictum to the more familiar saying 'Prima di fare e dire pensa a quel che può seguire'.⁴⁷ He prefaced his book with a charming line-drawing showing the inscription itself. Cecchetti was the first to transcribe the epigraph correctly. He moved the date forward drastically to the 14th or possibly early-15th century: 'i caratteri sono quelli comunissimi nelle iscrizioni del 1300, e nella mollezza dei segni

⁴⁵ G. A. Meschinello, *La chiesa ducale di S. Marco colle notizie del suo innalzamento; spiegazione delli mosaici, e delle iscrizioni* (Venice: Baronchelli, 1753), p. 29.

⁴⁶ B. Gamba, *Serie degli scritti impressi in dialetto veneziano* (Venice: Alvisopoli, 1832), pp. 11-12.

⁴⁷ E. A. Cicogna, *I due gruppi di porfido sull'angolo del Tesoro di S. Marco* (Venice: Merlo, 1844), pp. 27-28.

accennano al ripristino del tipo romano'.⁴⁸ The inscription appeared in various publications in the later 19th and through the 20th century, usually miscopied, and it remains an object of curiosity on the Internet.⁴⁹ Little of note was added to the question, however, until 1980 when Stussi surmised, on the basis of the appearance of the Gothic script and in agreement with Cecchetti, that it was probably sculpted in the (later) 14th century.⁵⁰ He reiterated this position in 1997, although noting cautiously that 'fatta un'ipotesi prudente sulla data, restano aperti molti e forse intersecantesi problemi riguardanti il senso dell'intero fregio in cui è ambientato quel testo'.⁵¹ Stussi's dating hypothesis was accepted by Tomasin,⁵² who in his very recent edition of the inscription describes it, more vaguely still, as 'certamente trecentesc[a]'.⁵³ In 2013 I tentatively suggested a date just after 1300: 'La scrittura gotica, la natura del volgare e lo stile dell'artefatto suggeriscono una data intorno all'inizio del Trecento'.⁵⁴

The chronology of the sculptural group of which the Treasury inscription is an integral element appears to decisively invalidate any date for the epigraph before 1250 or after 1325. According to the latest and most detailed art historical investigations, the stylistic evidence of the accompanying carvings points to the Treasury ensemble having been sculpted in the second half of the 13th century,⁵⁵ or, at the latest, in the early 14th century.⁵⁶ The palaeographic and linguistic evidence of the inscription itself, presented below in detail for the first time, suggests a date around 1300. This would make it the oldest extant vernacular inscription in Venice and its lagoon.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ B. Cecchetti, 'Dei primordi della lingua italiana e del dialetto in Venezia', *Atti del Regio Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, 15, 1869-70, 1585-1626 (p. 1590, note 3).

⁴⁹ See, e.g., http://www.veneziamuseo.it/terra/san_marco/Marco/marco_cur_om.htm.

⁵⁰ Stussi, 'Antichi testi', 91, note 11.

⁵¹ Stussi, 'Epigrafi medievali in volgare', 157-158.

⁵² Tomasin, 'Epigrafi trecentesche', 24.

⁵³ L. Tomasin, 'Venezia', in *Città italiane, storie di lingue e culture*, ed. by P. Trifone (Rome: Carocci, 2015), pp. 157-201 (176).

⁵⁴ Ferguson, 'Le pubbliche iscrizioni', 81.

⁵⁵ A. Niero, 'Simbologia dotta e popolare nelle sculture esterne', in *La basilica di San Marco, arte e simbologia*, ed. by B. Bertoli (Venice: Studium Cattolico Veneziano, 1993), p. 140; G. Tigler, 'Catalogo', in *Le sculture esterne di San Marco*, ed. by O. Demus et al. (Milan: Electa, 1995), pp. 221-222.

⁵⁶ W. Dorigo, *Venezia Romanica. La formazione della città medioevale fino all'età gotica*, I (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti/Cierre/Regione del Veneto, 2003), pp. 540-541.

⁵⁷ The oldest explicitly dated Venetian vernacular inscription is the epigraph painted in red on the so-called *Ancona di S. Donato*, a wooden and tempera-painted devotional image (cm 201 x 143) of 1310 executed for the church of SS. Maria e Donato on Murano, possibly by the workshop of Marco and Paolo Veneziano. The splendid, highly-coloured *ancona* is now restored and displayed in the Museo Diocesano in the S. Apollonia cloister-complex near S. Marco: *Corando / MCCCX indi/cion VIII / in te(m)po de lo / nobele homo / miser Donato / Memo honora/do podesta de / Myran facta / fo qvesta ancona de miser / San Donato*. The oldest dated

LOCATION: On the skirting frieze running along the external wall of the Treasury of St Mark's Basilica, on the south façade of the church near the main Porta della Carta entrance to the Doge's Palace. The inscription is located just above ground level, over the step and under the marble bench immediately to the left of the group of four late-antique porphyry figures known as the *Tetrarchs*, probably brought to Venice in the 13th century after the sack of Constantinople, embedded in the corner of the Treasury. Lying at the foot of the magnificent wall of the Treasury with its exotic assemblage of Byzantine-type marble plaques, the inscription passes unremarked by all but a few of the thousands of tourists who rest on the bench each year (Figs 1, 2 and 3).

TYPE AND DESCRIPTION: Didactic. A moralizing five-line inscription with a proverbial feel. Rhyming and roughly metrical, the carved dictum points out that one should think of the consequences of one's actions. The inscription cartouche, like the accompanying frieze and bench, is in Istrian stone. It measures cm 31 x 24 and is slightly convex, representing as it does an unfolded parchment whose end-scrolls are held by two flying *putti*, each pursued by a dragon with its jaws round one of their feet. The frieze itself is cm 585 long and is divided into a series of six oblong boxed compartments. The first and longest, taking up almost half the total length, has the inscription at its centre. It is followed by a row of five smaller compartments carved with bas-relief animals, seemingly in a chase. The eye of the observer is strongly drawn to the inscription by the serried leftward motion of the sculpted animals and the left-side *putto*; it is brought to a halt at the plaque by the motion in the opposite direction of the right-side *putto* and by the impressive mass of the *Tetrarchs*.

The sense of the inscription and the iconography of its sculptural context have generated an extensive critical literature.⁵⁸ The scene may well, in my view, be a figurative enactment of the prudential message of the inscription. More specifically, Giovanni Saccardo argued that since the Doge's Palace once

vernacular inscription produced and located in Venice itself is the epigraph from 1311 inscribed on a raised plaque (cm 30 x 30), in what appears to be trachite stone, on a large communal grave of the Scuola di S. Giovanni Evangelista. The sarcophagus is in the Spazio Badoer facing the *Scuola* in Campo S. Zuane (*sestiere* of S. Polo): + *Sepultura deli / frari batudi d(e)la / Scola de S. Ioh(an)e Eua(n)/g(e)l(ist)[a] fata cora(n)do M^o/CCC^oXI soto ser / Çane da Tressaga / guardia(n) (e) li soi oficia[li]*. Trace Romanesque elements are still present in both inscriptions, with the 1310 epigraph even displaying Byzantine <m> with medial fork.

⁵⁸ Tigler, 'Catalogo', 221.

acted as a palace of justice-cum-prison the epigraph was admonitory, with the hunting scene of the frieze an allegory of vice and its punishment.⁵⁹ Although we know nothing of the circumstances surrounding the commissioning and execution of the frieze and the inscription, their central position and public visibility in a ceremonial passageway in the heart of Venice – between the two centres of religious and political authority of the Venetian state – strongly suggest government sponsorship via the *Procuratores Sancti Marci*.

SCRIPT: Gothic majuscules with the intrusion of several unexpected letter forms. Unusual within medieval Venetian epigraphy in being cut on a curved surface, the text, carved in V-section and without guidelines, tends towards an unbroken or irregular spacing that requires a little teasing out. The grooving is unevenly worn down, with occasional damage to the letters, especially the <m> of *lom* (l. 1), and the inscription tablet has been notably roughened, particularly at the top. In spite of its deterioration which, as revealed by photographs taken in the 1950s and 1960s,⁶⁰ seems to be relatively recent, the inscription remains legible with care. The chiselling looks heavy, with strong wedges on the base of the shafts of the letters (which at circa cm 3 high and between cm 2 and 3 wide are large in relation to the inscription surface), but the earlier images reveal a finer contrast in stroke width. The text, justified on the left, with regular interlinear spacing, no abbreviations and limited module compression, must originally have been easy to decipher for the passer-by. This is especially the case as it is apparent from the oldest images, and particularly from a mid-19th century daguerreotype probably taken by Ruskin,⁶¹ and from the late-19th century photographs taken for Ferdinando Ongania,⁶² that the writing was picked out with black infilling to resemble inked letters on a manuscript. This would explain the apparently limited groove depth. The use of the vernacular adds to the sense that this pithy admonitory message about actions, consequences and personal responsibility was meant to reach as wide an audience as possible.

⁵⁹ G. Saccardo, 'Sculture simboliche', in *La Basilica di San Marco in Venezia: illustrata nella storia e nell'arte da scrittori veneziani*, II, ed. by C. Boito (Venice: F. Ongania, 1888-1892), p. 261.

⁶⁰ O. Demus, *The Church of San Marco in Venice. History, Architecture, Sculpture* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1960), plate 25.

⁶¹ J. Unrau, *Ruskin and St Mark's* (Wisbech: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 21.

⁶² F. Ongania, *La Basilica di San Marco in Venezia. Portafogli 1-5* (Venice: F. Ongania, 1881-1885), portfolio 5.3, plates 200 and 201.

The uncialesque lettering looks at first sight like the familiar Gothic that came eventually to dominate Venetian vernacular epigraphy in the 14th century. Characteristic of that system are the diagonal terminal spurs on the <s> in *inpensar* (l. 2); the wedge serifs on head and foot of <l> and <i>; the billowing lateral strokes of the <m> in *lom* (l. 1), with the left loop closed; the <d> with ascender curled straight to the left and splay-serifed in *die* (l. 2); the well-developed parallel upstroke on the arm of <l>; <c>, <e> and <f> closed by hairstrokes throughout; enlarged minuscule <h>; downward-pointing spikes on the topstroke of <t>; and ligatured <ar> in *inchontrar* (ll. 4-5). In addition, the limb of <h>, the upstroke on <l> and the right stem of <v/u> are finely curved and tapered. The overall effect is one of rounded but muscular Gothic decorativeness. It is not surprising that some editors have placed the inscription in the later 14th century, since the vast majority – and the most familiar examples – of Venetian Gothic inscriptions in the vernacular occur from the fourth decade of the century onwards. It is worth pointing out, however, that the drift towards such outcomes was already palpable in 13th and very-early 14th century uncialesque lettering in Venice on mosaic, with the earliest carved example being the proto-Gothic epitaph on the tomb of Doge Marin Morosini (circa 1253) in the narthex of St Mark's.⁶³ Indeed, by circa 1312 the civic inscription on a marble plaque (cm 45 x 35) commemorating the founding of a private hospital in Calle del Morion (*sestiere* of Castello) by Naticulier Cristian – cut with mature stroke modulation and aesthetic panache – replicates the forms of the present inscription in uniformly Gothic script (Fig. 4).⁶⁴ In other words, the appearance of well-developed, stone-carved Gothic epigraphic lettering in Venice around 1300 is plausible, particularly given the civic nature of our inscription. It is no coincidence that the inscription (cm 66.5 x 2) on the magnificent bronze door to the left of the main entrance to St Mark's – explicitly dated 1300 and signed by the Venetian goldsmith Magister Bertucius – is in Gothic script (Fig. 5).⁶⁵ One also recalls that the ducal coinage in the last three decades of the 13th century bore Gothic lettering.⁶⁶

⁶³ It reads: + *Hic requiesit d(omi)n(v)s Marinvs Morocen(vs) dux.*

⁶⁴ It reads: *Hospeda/l de ser N/atichli/er da cha / Cr[i]stian.*

⁶⁵ It reads: + *MCCC magister Bertucius avrifex venetus me fecit.* Bertucius appears to have been influenced by French Gothic models in both lettering and use of triple-dot interpuncts. Interesting is the presence of <a> with forked crossbar, conspicuous in St Mark's, occasional in early *mariegola* display capitals and frequent in regional Gothic and pre-Gothic traditions.

⁶⁶ See *Medieval European Coinage, with a catalogue of the coins in the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, 12 Italy (I) (Northern Italy)*, ed. by W. R. Day Jr., M. Matzke and A. Saccocci (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), pp. 1004-1058 (1006-1010).

Our argument for an early date would be reinforced if the lettering of the inscription betrayed archaic features. Perhaps the most striking letter on the inscription is the unusual and splendidly cut rounded capital <g> in *uega* (l. 3). The commoner rounded epigraphic <g> was derived ultimately from Roman rustic capitals. It was elongated in aspect, low-set and modest in swirl. It was regular alongside the square <g> in post-classical inscriptions in Italy up to the 10th century. It became the standard form of the letter in Romanesque and then Gothic inscriptions not only in Venice, Padua and the Veneto generally, but throughout Romance Europe. However, the sort of curled <g> found in our inscription is a *unicum* in Venetian epigraphy, Latin or vernacular. Its square proportions and calligraphic finesse, comprising tapering triple spirals and elongated backswept arm mirroring these, mark it out as the most perfect surviving example of a rarer tradition of capital <g> probably derived from manuscript majuscules. Some of its characteristic features are detectable, hybridized with the commoner rounded <g>, in 10th century inscriptions from Rome,⁶⁷ and in Romanesque and Gothic inscriptions in Venice and elsewhere in the 13th and 14th centuries. It is most closely matched in aspect and ductus by the capital <g> on the early 12th century inscription on the tomb of the *Dogaressa* Felicitas Michiel in the narthex of St Mark's, and by the forms of the letter on a series of Venetian commemorative ecclesiastical inscriptions on marble, dated 1188, 1219 and 1220.⁶⁸ The clearest realization of its archetypal forms – with arm upswept or splay-serifed – can be seen in book display capitals in Beneventan script from southern Italy, particularly in a series of manuscripts from around 1200.⁶⁹ The former variant is best represented in stone by our inscription. The latter makes its finest and last appearance in Venetian vernacular epigraphy in a Gothic inscription from 1363 of unknown, but possibly Venetian colonial, provenance.⁷⁰

A feature occurring regularly on Venetian Romanesque epigraphs of the 1200s, alongside the predominant straight-stemmed form, is the curved <v/u> seen in *uega* (l. 3) and *quelo* (ll. 3-4). In vernacular inscriptions in Venice up to 1400 this trait is highly unusual. It may not be a coincidence that right-stem curvature on <v/u> is present in the mosaics inside St Mark's and happens to be

⁶⁷ Gray, 'The palaeography of Latin inscriptions', 140.

⁶⁸ Di Lenardo, *La collezione epigrafica*, plates VII, X, XII.

⁶⁹ F. Troncarelli, 'Il medico', in *Condizione umana e ruoli sociali nel Mezzogiorno normanno-svevo*, ed. by G. Musca (Bari: Dedalo, 1991), pp. 337-357 (353-355).

⁷⁰ Carved on one side (cm 78 x 11) of a christening stoup converted from a Byzantine column capital, it is at present on display on the staircase of the Museo Correr. It reads: *MCCCLXIII i(n) t[e]npō d(e) misier p(re) / Agnolo d(e) Cha(n)dia e d(e) sier Bort/olamio d(e) Cehin fo fato*.

especially prominent on the great inscription (1260-70) – in Ottonian-influenced majuscules with Byzantine Romanesque condensing and ligatures in the initial section – on the St Alypius portal of the contiguous Basilica, over the mosaic depicting the ceremonial arrival of Mark's body in Venice.

Strikingly archaic, and absolutely unique in surviving medieval vernacular epigraphy in Venice, is the lowercase <q> of *quelo* (ll. 3-4) with its straight tail standing on the baseline: a feature alien to Gothic inscriptional practice. Its usage derives from the *koppa* letter, sometimes used as a symbol in earlier Greek for the numeral 90. It was deployed on titling script by the Byzantines for the *sigma-tau* ligature and came to be used by them for <q> when writing Latin.⁷¹ It is a feature that appears in Venice alongside the curved <v/u> on Byzantine Romanesque mosaics on ceiling and wall inside St Mark's and on the Romanesque inscription, with uncialesque elements, on the tomb (circa 1290) of the Doge Zuane Dandolo in S. Zanipolo. One has to wonder if this and the other striking scriptural features of the Treasury epigraph were suggested to the stonemason by the paper or parchment draft of the text, with *mise-en-page*, given to him by the commissioner or *ordinator* of the inscription, or whether these particular forms are down to his own initiative. Be that as it may, the only other case known to me of minuscule <q> used in this way in a Gothic inscription in or near Venice is its occurrence, three times, on a one-line epitaph (circa 1325) carved on the tomb of Pileo I da Prata. The sarcophagus is affixed to an inside wall of the out-of-the way provincial church of S. Giovanni dei Cavalieri in Prata di Pordenone (now in Friuli-Venezia Giulia) and is usually ascribed to a Venetian stonemason.⁷²

Very distinctive, and strongly linked to the 13th-century mosaic decoration in St Mark's, is the short medial crossbar on the <m> of *lom* (l. 1), the <i> of *die* (l. 2), *impensar* (l. 2), *li* (l. 4) and *inchontrar* (ll. 4-5), and on the shaft of <t> in *inchontrar*. This rare trait – seen sporadically on 13th-century French Gothic inscriptions, notably on the vernacular captions carved on the north-porch columns of Chartres cathedral – occurs nowhere else in 14th-or 15th-century Venetian vernacular epigraphy. In St Mark's, though, it is prominent on the surround inscription on the mosaics of the 13th-century Dome of the Creation, and shows up in the company of lowercase <q> and right-curved <v/u> on the mosaics of the late-13th century Moses cupola. It also features on

⁷¹ Morison, 'The Politics of Script', 71 and 220.

⁷² W. Wolters, *La scultura veneziana gotica (1300-1460)* (Venice: Alfieri, 1976), catalogue 16, plate 53.

the St Alypius portal inscription, as well as on the engraved Gothic running titles on the silver-gilt Altar Frontal of St Mark (circa 1300) in the Basilica Treasury (no. 38). Finally, both notched <i> and <t> are found alongside right-curved <v/u> and <a> with forked crossbar in the Latin inscription painted on to the *Platytera Madonna with Saints* (circa 1300) signed by Franciscus and displayed in the Sala dell'Albergo of the Scuola Grande di S. Giovanni Evangelista.⁷³ The lettering on that panel (cm 169 x 78) exhibits, it should be said, all the fully-realized Gothic features of our inscription.

Taken as a whole, the palaeographic evidence suggests a date around 1300. It may not be a coincidence that, according to Francesco Sansovino, the south façade of St Mark's was embellished by Doge Piero Gradenigo with plundered pieces in the last decade of the 13th century.⁷⁴

LANGUAGE: The brevity of the text means that it can provide only limited, but still useful, linguistic evidence to confirm our dating. Diphthongisation in Old Venetian of original open, stressed vowels Ō and Ē occurs along a definitely traceable but complex timeline. It is almost non-existent in the 13th century and very limited in the early-14th – with most instances confined to derivatives of Ē – before becoming overwhelming later in the century. The employment then, twice, of the undiphthongised modal *po* 'can' (ll. 1 and 4) < PŌTE(S)T, rather than the later diphthongised variant *può*, is consistent with a late 13th or early 14th century date. This is confirmed by the attestations in the *Opera del Vocabolario Italiano* (OVI) database which show *po* = 'must' in Old Venetian confined in writing to the period circa 1200-1335 (OVI, s.v. *po*).⁷⁵ The other modal *die* 'must' (l. 2) < DĒBET, common in Old Venetian and Old Tuscan, may probably be discarded as proof since *-ie-* does not derive directly from the diphthongisation of Ē but is likely to be the result of vowel raising provoked by the dissimilation of the regular phonological outcome *dee*. The latter occurs in the form *de'* alongside *die* in early-14th century Venetian texts, with *die* first attested in 1301 (OVI, s.v. *die*). It would be tempting to read much into the occurrence of *lom* (i.e. *l'om* 'man') in l. 1, rather than the expected *omo*. It could be construed as an example of the much more extensive apocope of final

⁷³ C. Vazzoler, *La Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista* (Venice: Marsilio, 2005), p. 58 (with illustration); R. Van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, IV (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1924), p. 2.

⁷⁴ F. Sansovino, *Venezia città nobilissima et singolare* (Venice: Iacomo Sansovino, 1581), p. 119r.

⁷⁵ At <http://gattoweb.oivi.cnr.it>. Last consulted March 2017.

vowels on nouns in Old Venetian pre-1300, although *omo* invariably appears with *om* in the earliest Venetian texts. It is more likely that the apocopated form is dictated here by the metrics of the saying or, given the ‘spoken’ paratactic syntax of the proverb, that it is a relic popular variant. Regular in Old Venetian are the three apocopated verb infinitives in *-r*: *far* (l. 1) ‘to do, to make, to act’; *inpensar* (l. 2) ‘to think, to reflect’, with the typical Venetian verbal prefix *in-*; and *inchontrar* ‘to meet, to encounter’ and, here, ‘to befall’. *Li* (l. 4) is the normal Old Venetian third-person masculine indirect object pronoun, indicating that *inchontrar* in the sense of ‘to befall’ is intransitive. *Uega* (l. 3) ‘let him see/consider’, from the infinitive *veder* (stressed on the first syllable), is an exhortative present subjunctive (like Italian *veda*) and is paralleled by *vaga* ‘let him go’, *staga* ‘let him stay’, *daga* ‘let him give’.

5. CONCLUSION

Our evidence-based investigation has demonstrated the potential results obtainable from a fully integrated philological analysis of an undated and problematic medieval vernacular inscription. A plausible approximate date for an important epigraphic and cultural artefact, argued in detail for the first time, has been postulated using, in particular, the diachronic tools of palaeography and linguistics. If the conclusions reached are correct then this methodology has helped to identify the earliest surviving vernacular inscription in Venice and its lagoon territories. It has also shown decisively that mature Gothic inscriptional lettering was present in the city by around 1300, several decades earlier than had previously been appreciated. It confirms, finally, the extraordinary eclecticism of Venetian epigraphic script in the transition period before the dominance of Gothic in the 14th century.

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